

TITLE OF REPORT: **Missing from Care Episodes and child sexual exploitation for Children and Young People Looked After by Gateshead Council**

REPORT OF: **Interim Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from December 2015 to November 2016 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child sexual exploitation.

1. Background

Young people who go “missing” from the care of the Council whether from foster care or residential care, do so for many often complex reasons which cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experience within the Looked After system.

2. Policy Context

Gateshead Council has clear procedures regarding missing children and young people which incorporate a joint protocol between Northumbria Police and Children’s Social Care. The procedures and data systems form part of the Local Safeguarding Children Board’s (LSCB’s) oversight of arrangements. A designated officer is a legal requirement for each Local Authority. This remit is delegated to Service Manager Looked After Children.

3. Definition of Missing from Care

“A Looked After young person is considered missing if he/she is absent from her place of residence without authority.” Children can be reported missing within 30 minutes to 3 hours from their anticipated return time.

To identify the type of missing activity there are three main categories of missing episodes outlined in the missing children and young people procedure, ‘Absent’, ‘Missing’ and ‘Absconder’. In addition a missing strategy for each young person may be different depending upon the management of assessed risks relating to the young person.

Absent

Absent - "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk."

The 'absent' category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk. 'Absent' cases should not be ignored, and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk.

Some police forces in the country formally record episodes of "absent" episodes and provide a different response to these cases than episodes where people are reported "missing". This process was introduced following revised guidance for police forces from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in 2013. Northumbria Police decided that it was too much of a risk to consider introducing the 'Absent' Category in 2013 as this would delay taking a missing report in relation to those individuals considered most at risk of serious harm and CSE. However, given the great deal of progress they have made in relation to the identification and management of risk in particular in relation to CSE, they have now adopted the 'Absent' category as per national guidance.

Some children absent themselves for a short period and then return and during their absence their whereabouts are known or they have made contact. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose or accidentally, and may be testing boundaries, but do not jeopardise their wellbeing. This kind of boundary testing is within the range of normal teenage behaviour and not necessarily considered a risk.

Whether the absence is careless or deliberate, if there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety, or that of the public, it may fall within the absent category. The assessment of the carer is initially that they are safe but are away from home without permission. It is still important that staff/ carers record these incidences (as absent, not missing episodes), in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable. Absent episodes must be carefully monitored however as the child may subsequently go missing.

If a child's whereabouts are known then they cannot be 'missing'. For example, in some circumstances young people staying with a friend without prior agreement may not be 'at risk' and it would be inappropriate to flag this event as a missing from care incident or report it to the police.

In situations where a child is absent without permission the first response may be that providers of their care along with any relevant staff from their responsible authority, which could include the child's social worker, should act as a responsible parent and take all practical steps to establish the child's location and to ensure that they return to their placement without delay.

A child or young person who is not where they are expected to be absent should be classified as absent if the criteria below apply:

- They have deliberately or carelessly absented themselves

- They are likely to return of their own accord or they are staying with others known to them
- They are likely to be easily located
- They are unlikely to suffer or cause significant harm whilst absent

The carer or residential staff member should record any information gained on the whereabouts of the young person whilst absent, and this should be shared as appropriate with the police. Where the person remains absent, and the carer/ staff feels the individual may be at risk of harm then a report should be made to the police.

Missing

Missing - "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another."

A child is categorised as missing when their location or reason for absence is unknown **and/ or** there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is a potential danger to the public.

A child or young person who is absent should be classified as missing if one or more of the criteria below apply:

- There is identified or imminent risk of the child or young person being exposed to significant harm
- The child or young person poses a risk of significant harm to others
- There are suspicious circumstances
- The absence is out of character or unusual behaviour
- There are indications that the child has already come to harm
- There are indications that the episode is not a deliberate or careless act
- There are indications that the child or young person
- Is not expected to return within reasonable time limits
- Is not staying at homes of others known to them
- Will not be easily located

A child or young person in this category must be reported to the police.

Absconder

An absconder is a child or young person who is absent from a placement without the permission of the responsible person and who is subject to a legal order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings.

A child or young person in this category must be reported to the Police as soon as possible and treated as a wanted person. The Police must be made aware of the particular order under which the child has been placed in the residence and the expiry date of the order.

4. Risk Assessment

In assessing the significance of any child's absence a risk assessment must be undertaken. The service has developed a screening assessment tool based which is completed by the care team and if there are persistent missing episodes this is presented to the Multi agency Sexual Exploitation Trafficking meeting.

Where a child is missing, relevant staff from Local Authority and Police, must consider the above definitions and take into consideration the child's care plan and factors listed below, when assessing risk:

- The legal status of the person in care (e.g. Emergency Protection Order, Full or Interim Care Order, remanded, curfew conditions etc.)
- Previous behaviour patterns. (Such as a history of absence and quick return)
- The child's state of mind/perceived risk. (Is child likely to self-harm or commit suicide? Does child see risks in a balanced way?)
- Group behaviour at the time of the absence
- Whether the young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation
- Any physical or learning disabilities the child may have which increase the risk to them
- Is the child vulnerable due to age or infirmity or any other factor?
- Is the child suspected to be the victim of a significant crime in progress, e.g. abduction?
- Are there family /relationship problems or recent history of family conflict, including domestic abuse
- Does the missing person have any physical illness, disability or mental health problems?
- Are they in the company of a person who may cause them harm?
- Do they require essential medication which is not likely to be available?
- Is there ongoing bullying or harassment, e.g. racial, sexual, homophobic or local community concerns and/or cultural issues?
- Do they pose a threat of harm to others?
- Is there drug or alcohol dependency or substance misuse?
- Any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident influencing the risk assessment?

It is important that the assessment of risk is a dynamic process and should be re-considered and challenged at every point during a child or young person's absence. As a minimum requirement when a child is missing the risk assessment should be reviewed every eight hours and the level of prevailing risk agreed by carers and other professionals responsible for that young person's health safety and wellbeing.

Categories of risk

HIGH

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child or young person is in danger through their own vulnerability or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

MEDIUM

The risk posed is likely to place the child or young person in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.

LOW

There is no apparent threat of danger to either the child or young person or the public. The key messages from research regarding young people Missing from Care over the last five years indicated the need for a regional approach and highlighted that:

- Few young people leave their local area
- Many stay with friends known to them/relatives, less than a third or a quarter sleep rough
- Most common reasons for running away are conflict with parents/step parents and carers and wanting to spend time with friends and partners
- Young people who runaway are more likely to be absent from school through refusal to attend or exclusion
- Young people are at as much risk whether they are missing for the first time or on any subsequent occasions
- Young people who go missing place are often very vulnerable and place themselves at risk and are exposed to violence, victimisation, sexual exploitation and involvement in crime

5. Overall data

There were 875 missing episodes in total between December 2015 and November 2016, of which 511 (58%) were looked after children. This represents an increase in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2014-2015 (865) and also an increase in terms of the number of missing from care episodes

In January 2016 Northumbria Police began to differentiate between a “missing” episode and an “absent” episode. The figures shown below include those reported as missing and absent. Given that the new recording system was introduced three quarters of the way through the financial year it would not make sense to differentiate. Future data reports will however record by category and will demonstrate how the introduction of the “Absent” category impacts on the missing data.

There is a difference between the number of missing/absent episodes each month and the number of missing/absent individuals as some people will have more than one episode. Each month the number of individual young people in total and individual Looked After Children reported missing varies and is different from the number of missing episodes.

Over the last 12 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in the majority of cases returned fairly quickly to their placements. Young people who are persistent in being absent without permission, often leave their placements because of conflict primarily due to boundary setting, for example around coming in times or refusal to allow them to undertake activities which are not felt to be consistent with promoting their welfare. Some young people have links with others in other placements and are absent from their placements together. Social workers and staff are familiar with these young people, their contacts, likely whereabouts and they usually return later that day, rarely are young people in the care of the Council missing overnight or more than 24 hours.

A small minority of missing episodes of Looked After Children are for more than a 24-hour period. They are young people who are in the older age group and who have had very complex needs and backgrounds. Clear procedures are in place to manage these longer episodes.

Between December 2015 and November 2016 there were 103 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours. The majority of those young people were missing from care and is a large increase from the previous year where there were 66 episodes and a further increase from 2013-2014 where there were only 44 episodes lasting 24 hours or more.

Dec 2015-Nov 2016 data

Month	Total episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	LAC MFC episodes	Number of individual LAC
December	76	44	13	42 (55%)	19
January	54	23	10	40 (74%)	10
February	65	25	9	49 (75%)	10
March	67	45	6	35 (52%)	17
April	76	47	16	50 (66%)	22
May	68	41	11	44 (65%)	19
June	57	32	4	35 (61%)	13
July	73	39	6	44 (60%)	15
August	58	35	10	33 (57%)	13
September	100	50	5	48 (48%)	19
October	104	48	0	55 (53%)	15
November	77	50	13	36 (47%)	18
TOTAL	875		103	511 (58%)	

Month	Placement young person reported missing from (number of episodes)					Total
	Gateshead residential		Other residential (out of borough, private)	Foster care		
	1	2		Gateshead	Out of borough	
December	3	9	4	12	14	42
January	9	18	10	3	0	40
February	16	28	2	2	1	49
March	11	7	3	7	7	35
April	8		17	21	4	50
May	13		7	16	8	44
June	18		2	10	5	35
July	18		10	8	8	44
August	14		9	6	4	33
September	22		8	10	8	48
October	18		15	13	9	55
November	6		7	20	3	36
TOTAL	156	62	94	128	71	511

Key issues to note:

- In December 2015 there were 13 episodes where a young person was missing for over 24 hours and four of those young people were missing from local authority care.
- In January 2016 there were 10 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and eight of them were looked after children
- In February 2016 there were 9 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and all of them were looked after children
- In March 2016 there were 9 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 5 of them were looked after children.
- In April 2016 there were 21 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 10 of them were looked after children.
- In May 2016 there were 11 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and all of them were looked after children.
- In June 2016 there were 5 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 3 of those young people were missing from local authority care.
- In July 2016 there were 8 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 4 of those were looked after children.
- In August 2016 there were 10 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and all of them were looked after children
- In September 2016 there were 8 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 4 of those young people were missing from local authority care.
- In October 2016 there were 3 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and none of those were looked after children
- In November 2016 there were 18 episodes that lasted over 24 hours and 7 of those were looked after children.

6. Other relevant information

MSET

In addition to being reviewed and monitored by their own social workers and care team, children who go missing regular from care are also monitored by the LSCB Missing, Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Sub Group (MSET). The MSET is a multi-agency group chaired by the police and meets monthly, discussing individual cases where there are concerns around missing from home/care and or Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and/or Human Trafficking. MSET processes have recently been reviewed and strengthened, based on good practice from other areas, and a robust risk assessment and monitoring framework is in place for those cases of concern. In 2015-2016 there were 43 young people discussed at the MSET, which is a decrease from the previous year. To date 34 young people have been discussed in 2016-2017

Individual social workers attend the meeting to present the case, share information and receive information from other agencies. A diversion plan is then put in place to address and manage the presenting risks and concerns. Representatives from children's homes and fostering homes are members of MSET, in addition to the Service Managers for LAC, Safeguarding and R&A/EDT. The team manager of the LAC & Young People's Team and Team Manager of the Fostering Team are also members to ensure that information from the meetings is disseminated appropriately.

In addition to discussing individual cases, MSET meetings also focus on wider areas of intelligence in Gateshead and other areas locally, for example known CSE "hot spots" in the borough or issues raised in MSET meetings elsewhere within the Northumbria Police force area. This information is then disseminated as appropriate so that professionals are alert to particular issues of concern

Return interviews

When a child is reported missing from home or care for the second or subsequent time in a six month period or for a single episode lasting longer than 24 hours they are offered an Independent Return Interview. These interviews are undertaken by Youth Workers or a specialist CSE worker from the Children's Society's SCARPA project. The outcome of the return interview is shared with the young person's social worker, the police and any other relevant professionals. In cases where a Gateshead child is looked after and placed out of borough the information is also shared with the hosting local authority.

7. Case Scenario

The following outlines a typical response to a young person missing from children's home:

- Child A, a female aged 15 years is placed in Children's home under a Care Order.
- The young person leaves the building with permission at 6:30 to return at agreed time of 10:00pm. She does not return at this time. She has a history

of coming home late and has occasionally stayed out overnight and classified as missing.

- Staff allowed her an hour before reporting her missing to the police. This had been agreed by the care team and formed part of her risk assessment. The police wanted to class her as absent rather than missing, however as she was vulnerable and at risk of CSE the staff ensured that the police classed her as missing. They informed EDT of the missing episode, shared the Missing from Care details and gave them the police log number.
- Parents were informed and advised to inform staff should she arrive there.
- She had not returned to the placement by 8am the following day and further telephone calls were made to the police in order that intelligence is shared and to maximise locating the young person.
- Police make a visit to the children's home at to gather further information from staff and young people
- Police continue to make searches of the local area and places where the young person may be. Regular contact is maintained between parties.
- The girl returns of her own accord after 22 hours. All parties are informed of her safe.
- On return to the children's home the young person is spoken to by staff to ensure she is ok, to establish reasons for the missing episode. She is unwilling to say where she has been, other than to say she was safe and had stayed at a friend's.
- Police make a safe and well visit to the young person.
- An Independent Return Interview in line with LSCB Missing from Care Procedures takes place, however no further information is shared about who she had been with.
- The staff and social worker meet review the risks and agree actions.
- The young person has two further similar episodes in a 3 week period and her name is discussed at the MSET meeting, scrutinising the plan and considering the risk assessment.

8. Child Sexual exploitation

The service monitors the risks of child sexual exploitation very carefully. Currently there are 12 young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation which is a similar figure this time last year, including 1 males and 11 females aged 14 years plus.

Processes have been developed to monitor and review these young people to ensure they are categorised appropriately and receive the right support and interventions, which include interventions to minimise risk, disrupt activity and develop incentives and sanctions. The plans are also scrutinised within the MSET meeting.

There is also an escalation process with senior management of the children and families service and the police to ensure further scrutiny is undertaken.

There is a comprehensive training programme for staff and foster carers to ensure all professionals working with young people at risk of CSE have the knowledge and skills to support and educate the young people

9. Sanctuary South

An innovation bid was submitted to the Home Office to enable Northumbria Police and safeguarding partners to build on the key learning from Operation Sanctuary by establishing two multi-agency operational teams, one covering the North of the force and the other the South, to tackle child exploitation, vulnerability and modern day slavery. Operation Sanctuary North has been running since April 2015 and Sanctuary South has been live since Monday 4th April 2016.

Sanctuary South is based in Washington and covers the three local authorities in the South of the Northumbria area, Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside. The investigative and intelligence teams are based in Washington Police Station and the multi – agency team is based in a non-police premises at 'The Hub', Crowther Industrial Estate, Washington. The intention of co-location within a hub arrangement is to bring together children and adult social care services, health, the police and a broad range of third sector organisations including Bright Futures, Changing Lives and Barnados. In keeping with the significant benefits achieved from the approach taken by Operation Sanctuary North, social workers and police conduct joint visits to victims to facilitate active engagement and access to specialist services at the earliest opportunity. The multi – agency team will adopt a non-police led victim strategy involving social services and the voluntary sector to secure on-going trust and confidence with potential complainants. This is a Northumbria Police led multi agency team operation to target the criminal behaviour of those who commit sexual offences against vulnerable women and children.

The Police team is structured as follows:

- Detective Inspector Claire Wheatley
- Victim Team of 1 x D/Sgt and 4 x DC
- Investigation Team of 3 x D/Sgt and 15 x DC
- Intelligence Cell of 1 x D/Sgt, 1 x DC, 1x PC
- 1 x Analyst and 1 x Researcher
- Missing from Home Coordinator of 1 x Sergeant

This Police investment will be supported by partner resources working alongside the Police Victim Team within a Victim's Hub. The partner resources are structured as follows:

- 1 x Senior Practitioner Children – Sunderland
- 1 x Social worker Children – Sunderland
- 0.5 x Adult Social worker – Sunderland.
- 1x Social Worker Children – Gateshead
- 0.5 Adult Social worker – Gateshead
- 1x Social worker Children – South Tyneside
- 0.5 Social worker Adult – South Tyneside
- 1 x Changing Lives Outreach Worker
- 2 x Bright Futures Outreach Workers
- 1 x Barnardo's Family Therapist, Northumbria area, Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside.

The funding for these posts will be reviewed in April 2017 and it is hoped this resource will be supported by the police and partner agencies.

10. Practice developments

Northumbria police now have 3 dedicated Missing from Home Coordinators with a remit to improve the police response when someone is reported missing, and to work strategically with partners to reduce the numbers of children and young people reported missing from care. The coordinator from the Central area works closely with the Service Director- Social Work, Children and Families, the LSCB Business Manager, the Local authority Children's Home and Private Children's Homes within Gateshead.

The LSCB Business Manager has continued to work closely with the SCARPA project of the Children's Society as part of their work to establish a "hub and spoke" model following a number of years of successful work in Newcastle. The worker provides training to partner agency staff in statutory services, including social workers, residential staff and foster carers, on sexual exploitation and provide case-based advice to frontline staff.

There has also been the development of a strategic MSET group which the operational MSET group also reports. This group is developing further awareness and strategic plans linking resources to the CSE focus developing multi agency information and training.

The LSCB continues to receive written reports three times a year on children who go missing from home and care and are at risk of sexual exploitation.

The local authority continues to work to develop a system to capture and share accurate and meaningful information on missing from care episodes with the LSCB.

The local authority will continue to work with the LSCB to strengthen work to protect those young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation

11. Recommendation

It is requested that the Looked After Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual report on missing from care issues within Learning and Children.

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